

MAY 7, 1987

Our operation has been very lucky this spring. We haven't been effected by the labor shortage as bad as other ranches. The drouth that ended a year ago left us with such a small inventory that we don't need much help to look after what livestock that's left. The banks have also been in such a picky humor that I haven't bothered them about restocking. I've got grass for a couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of cattle but I haven't got enough nerve left to go in on a three-way partnership on a brindle milk cow.

We just finished shearing last night. I've never seen a smoother shearing operation. We slipped 3.5 working days into 8.75 on the calendar without a hitch. Two of those evenings we worked until dark. This will be the last time that shearing will last that late. The new law prohibiting the hiring of unpapered aliens is going to change the work force to domestic shearers. It's my best guess that by next year it's going to take so long, sheep are going to grow extra wool from waiting in the traps.

Wool has a shelf life. It is subject to contamination by vegetation, weather damage and external and internal parasites. The age of the lambs has to be considered, and the month of June is the latest that we can shear in the Shortgrass Country.

Whoever the new shearers turn out to be, sheep shearing has never had a plan or a schedule. It's a theory or idea that happens on a sheep outfit. Once the idea develops, then I call the cook, the wool grader, the hands, and the shearing captain to share it. The following morning, I call them back to make what changes that need to be passed on. If the idea is so bold as to require rounding up more sheep, I generally think of who I failed to notify after I am a couple of miles from the house. The choice then is whether to turn back and leave the boys on horseback shorthanded or spend the shearing day short a man. Quite often that act of omission never surfaces, because by the time the shearing crew assembles in varying states of alcoholic indisposition, roll call is an academic matter.

As the boss, I have an easy job once the shearing gets underway. I answer 90 percent of the questions with the simple answer "If it doesn't rain, we'll do such-and-such". For the greenest wool packer to the most seasoned veteran, I've used that same reply for 30 or 40 years.

A guy will come hunting me up in an awful fizz about the amount sacks we have left. He'll say something like, "Monte, you want me to run to town for some more sacks? We just have enough to last until dinner. " Out comes the old standby, I'll say "Sure, if it don't rain."

Before he's out of sight, a report comes in that we are out of water up at the house and the only sober shearer in the crew has cut his right hand. I may have to vary the wording, but basically, I tell them that depending on the weather, we can get a doctor and might find a pump man.

The devoted sheepmen and the casual operators are going to be easy to recognize next year. It seems like when a government gets down on you they don't ever let up. I wonder how it got started that hiring wet Mexicans was worth that much attention.